Research Notes for Catherine Sullivan Whelan (1819 - 1889)

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Research Overview:

Catherine Sullivan is present in the record in a way that is almost ghost-like—consistently named, repeatedly implied, but rarely visible as an individual. She appears as the wife of John Whelan and the mother of a large group of children baptized in the Dungarvan area, clustered around Spring (Duke/Marquis) and nearby townlands. Her marriage to John Whelan is documented, yet her name is among the most common in the parish, complicating identification beyond that role. No baptism has been identified for her, and no death record can yet be attributed to her with confidence. Her parents are unknown, and her place of birth has not been established. Her life must therefore be read indirectly, through continuity of place, repeated childbirth, and the survival of her children rather than through records that name her outright.

Catherine's adult life unfolded during the decades surrounding the Great Famine. Parish records show her bearing children through the famine years and into the early 1850s, a period marked by repeated births, reused given names, and gaps that suggest loss. The pattern of the family's landholdings—one dwelling supplemented by small adjoining plots and a garden—describes a household under pressure, attempting to extract enough food to sustain a growing family during years of scarcity. Catherine's labor is never recorded, but the evidence places her at the center of a domestic economy stretched thin at the worst possible time.
Not everyone could leave, not everyone did leave, and the pattern of who left and who stayed follows kin ties and circumstance rather than chance. Emigration to the United States occurred in connection with Catherine's brother, John Sullivan, and his family, around whom several of her children reorganized their lives. Two middle daughters, unmarried at the time, emigrated and settled near him, later marrying widowers. By contrast, two daughters remained in the Dungarvan area, married locally, and raised large families of their own, maintaining the family's presence there across generations. Read together, these outcomes suggest that while some children left when opportunity aligned with kin already abroad, John and Catherine themselves chose—or were compelled—to remain in Ireland, carrying the household through famine and its aftermath rather than dispersing as a unit.

Catherine disappears from the record earlier than her husband and children, and that disappearance is itself informative. She does not appear as an informant, leaseholder, or census subject, and she likely died before civil registration captured her death. Yet her presence continues to register indirectly: through the sustained residence of her children in Spring and neighboring townlands after John Whelan's death, and through the fact that a granddaughter remained close enough to record that death in 1898. Catherine herself fades from view, but the family she sustained remains visible.

Catherine Sullivan's significance lies less in recoverable detail than in structure. She represents the women whose lives shaped survival without generating records: bearing children during famine, maintaining households under sustained constraint, and leaving continuity rather than documentation as evidence. Her outline remains incomplete, but the shape of her life—defined by place, endurance, and the afterlives of her children—is clear.

Time Line:

1819– **Born** probably near Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[1]

4 Jan 1822 - Birth of brother Edward Sullivan (1820 -) at Waterford, Ireland.[2]

12 Feb 1839 - Marriage to John Phelan (1820 - 1898) at Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[3]
Marriage of John Whelan (recorded as John Phelan) and Catherine Sullivan at the Roman Catholic parish of Dungarvan, County Waterford. This marriage marks Catherine Sullivan's first appearance in the surviving record; no baptism or family-of-origin record has yet been identified for her.

Intermarriage between the Whelan and Sullivan families, with at least two siblings from each family marrying.

Mar 1840 - Birth of son John Whelan (1840 -) at Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[4] Possibly died in County Limerick, Ireland.

Apr 1841- Birth of daughter Catherine "Kate" Whelan (1841 - 1925) at Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[5] baptized 25 April 1841 in Spring, Dungarvan, died 7 November 1925 in Springmount, County Waterford.

Jun 1842 - Birth of daughter Mary Whelan (1942 - before 1851) at Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[6]

Nov 1843 - Birth of daughter Ellen Whelan (1843) at Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[7]

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[1] Catherine Sullivan's Baptismal Record

[2] Brother Edward Sullivan's Baptismal Record

[3] Marriage record for Catherine Sullivan and John Whelan

[4] Birth of daughter Catherine "Kate" Whelan

[5] Birth of daughter Mary Whelan

[6] Birth of son John Whelan

[7] Birth of daughter Ellen Whelan

Great Famine - 1845 to 1852[8]
John Whelan and Catherine Sullivan were raising a growing family in Spring (Duke/Marquis) during this period.

1843–1847 – Gap in surviving baptism records for the children of John Whelan and Catherine Sullivan; one or more births may be unrecorded, or the records may not have survived.

Oct 1847 - Birth of son Edward Whelan (1847 -) at Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[9]

Oct 1848 - Birth of son James Whelan (1848 - 1895) at Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[10]

Before 1850 – Emigration of Catherine Sullivan's brother, John Sullivan, and his family to the United States.

Just before 1850 – Emigration of Catherine Sullivan's brother, Edward Sullivan, to the United States**.**

Before 1851 - Death of daughter Mary Whelan (1842 - 1851) in Waterford, Ireland.[11]
The reuse of the given name reflects the likely death of an earlier child of the same name, consistent with mortality patterns during the famine period.

Jan 1851 - Birth of daughter Mary Whelan (1851 - before 1895) in Waterford, Ireland.[12]

[8] Great Famine - 1845 to 1852

[9] Birth of son Edward Whelan

[10] Birth of son James Whelan

[11] Death of daughter Mary Whelan

[12] Birth of daughter Mary Whelan

1851 - Griffith's Valuation at Curraheen Commons Townland, Waterford, Ireland.[13]

11 Sep 1852 - Birth of daughter Honoria E. "Nora" Whelan (1852 - 1921) in Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[14]

7 Mar 1855 - Birth of daughter Johanna "Anna" Whelan (1855 - 1881) in Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[15]

1856 - Birth of son Michael Whelan (1856 - 1859) in Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[16]

Before 1856 - Death of son Michael Whelan (1856 - 1859) in Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[17]

30 Oct 1859 - Birth of son Michael Whelan (1859 - 1930) in Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[18]
The reuse of the given name reflects the likely death of an earlier child of the same name.

6 Apr 1860 - Birth of daughter Mary Whelan (1960 -) in Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[19]

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[13] Ireland, Office of the General Valuation, General Valuation of Ratable Property in Ireland (Griffith's Primary Valuation), County Waterford, Dungarvan Poor Law Union, Kilrush Civil Parish, p. 147, Curraheen Commons Townland, Map Reference 2b, John Whelan, 1851; digital image, "Griffith's Valuation," Ask about Ireland.

[14] Birth of daughter Honoria E. "Nora" Whelan

[15] Birth of daughter Johanna "Anna" Whelan

[16] Death is based on a second son that they named Michael.

[17] Death of son Michael Whelan

[18] Birth of son Michael Whelan

[19] Birth of daughter Mary Whelan

Jun 1861 - Birth of daughter Margaret Whelan (1860 -) in Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[20]

Several given names recur among the children, consistent with the loss of earlier children of the same name: a daughter named Mary in 1842, another Mary in 1851, and two sons named Michael, born in 1856 and 1859.

Note: These baptisms mark a sustained period of childbearing for Catherine Sullivan spanning the famine years, with repeated births, reused given names, and gaps that suggest loss.

After 1861 – Catherine Sullivan disappears from the surviving record. No death record, census entry, or later document has been identified that names her directly.

1848 to 1864 - Griffith's Valuation for Lismore and Mocollop, Waterford, Ireland[21]

Note: Catherine Sullivan does not appear in Griffith's Valuation or in later land records, indicating that John Whelan is recorded independently by this point.

1848 to 1864 - Griffith's Valuation Kilrush, Spring duke, Decies Barony without Drum .Waterford, Ireland.[22]

Note: The appearance of Catherine Sullivan's children in the United States aligns with the earlier emigration of her brother, John Sullivan, and his family, indicating kin-based relocation rather than independent movement.

1870 – Emigration of daughter Norah Whelan, 18, to the United States.

1873 – Emigration of daughter Ellen Whelan, 30, to the United States.

[20] Birth of daughter Margaret Whelan

[21] Griffith's Valuation

[22] Griffith's Valuation

1873 – Emigration of son James Whelan, 24, to the United States.

After 1881 - Death of daughter Johanna "Anna" Whelan (1855-1881), probably in Ireland.[23]

Anne is listed as the informant on nephew Michael Dunne's death record, so she is still alive.

About 1889 - Death probably near Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[24]
I don't have the death record. I need to verify it. The record is for Catherine Whelan of Dungarvan, County Waterford, who was 70 years old when she died in 1889. Is this my ancestor? It is possible that Catherine Whelan died before civil registration began in 1864 or that her death was not registered.

Burial in Dungarvan, Waterford, Ireland.[25]

The historical society in Dungarvan thinks she is possibly buried in a mass grave near her townland. She is not buried with her husband, John, at St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery, and she is not remembered on that gravestone.

[23] Death of daughter Johanna "Anna" Whelan

[24] Catherine Sullivan Whelan Death Record

[25] Find a Grave

Appendix:

A. Catherine Sullivan

Catherine Sullivan is proposed to be part of a sibling group that includes John Sullivan, who married Julia Whelan, and Edward Sullivan, whose son Edward later married Anna Zamp. This proposed relationship is based on converging evidence from the nineteenth century rather than a single proving record: shared geographic association with Dungarvan, County Waterford; parallel timelines; U.S. records that place these Sullivan families in related migration streams; and DNA matches that link descendants of all three lines. Taken together, these elements support the working hypothesis that Catherine, John, and Edward Sullivan were siblings, though no Irish record has yet been identified that explicitly names them together as children of the same parents.

DNA evidence plays a central role in sustaining this hypothesis. Descendants of Catherine Sullivan Whelan, John Sullivan, and Edward Sullivan appear among shared DNA matches, indicating a close familial relationship between these lines. While DNA alone cannot establish precise parentage or confirm sibling relationships on its own, it provides independent support that these Sullivan families belong to the same extended kin group.
There are also indications that additional Sullivan family research exists outside the public record. A relative in the United States, believed to be knowledgeable about the Sullivan family, may have uncovered Irish family history but has not shared documentation. Separately, a DNA match in the Sullivan line reports that her brother has conducted extensive research on the family, none of which is published online and is instead held privately. He reportedly visited Ireland and stood in the church where John Sullivan and Julia Whelan were married. Although these accounts cannot be evaluated directly, they suggest that recoverable Sullivan family history may exist and that the connection could be reconstructed independently through further work.

Catherine Sullivan's death remains undocumented. Although national civil registration of deaths began in Ireland in 1864, Catherine may have died shortly before that date. Her husband, John Whelan, is buried at St. Mary's graveyard alongside their eldest daughter, Catherine Dunne, yet no burial record has been identified for Catherine herself. It is possible that she was buried in an unmarked grave, potentially near what is now a traffic circle

along the road between Cobh and Dungarvan. This possibility remains speculative and reflects the limits of the surviving record rather than a documented conclusion.

B. Edward Sullivan of Portsmouth, Ohio

Edward Sullivan settled in Portsmouth, Ohio, where his adult life and descendants can be followed with greater continuity than in earlier records. The focus for this line is to identify his wife, document his children, and trace his descendants forward through Portsmouth-area records. Marriage records, census entries, cemetery records, and local newspapers are likely to provide the clearest evidence for Edward's household structure and the persistence of his family in the community.

Edward's move to Portsmouth remains an open question. The record should be examined for indications of whether his relocation was connected to employment, community ties, or the presence of other family members who may have settled there earlier. Tracing neighboring households, witnesses, and recurring associates in Portsmouth may help clarify why this location became the center of his life in the United States.

Given the relatively strong survival of records for Dungarvan and the surrounding areas in County Waterford, Edward's Irish origins should be approached through careful locality-based reconstruction rather than broad surname searches. Irish land records, including Griffith's Valuation, may help distinguish Sullivan households and identify possible connections to the Sullivan-Whelan family already documented. Continued, low-pressure outreach to possible relatives in Ireland remains worthwhile, even where earlier attempts have not produced results.

C. John Sullivan and Julia Whelan:

John Sullivan's tombstone states that he was born in Dungarvan, County Waterford, Ireland. "Dungarvan" may refer to the town itself or to the civil or Catholic parish of the same name. His children were born in the townland of Spring, and the family's place can be located on an annotated map. Catholic church records for the period of John's birth are not available, limiting the possibility of identifying his baptism.

John married Julia Whelan, probably in County Waterford, before 1842. Julia—recorded as the daughter of John Whelan and Mary Cooley—was born

in County Waterford on 4 January 1822. She died in Buena Vista, Scioto County, Ohio, on 12 January 1876 and was buried in Greenlawn Cemetery. John and Julia likely immigrated to the United States between 1847 and 1851, based on the birthplaces and ages of their children. By 1870 the family was living in Nile Township, Scioto County, Ohio. Later records place parts of the family in both Ohio and New York, suggesting a secondary migration within the United States.

Notes to preserve (process and leads, kept as narrative)
This family's U.S. record trail raises two linked questions: why two of John and Julia's sons moved from Ohio to upstate New York, and what community ties—neighbors, churches, employment, or other associations—may have shaped that move. Ohio and New York census records provide the basic migration pattern, but land, employment, church, and local records may contain the connective tissue that explains it.

Edward Sullivan's later life in Portsmouth, Ohio, is also part of this cluster and may help clarify Sullivan family relationships and movement. Portsmouth marriage, death, and census records, along with directories, property records, and possible newspaper mentions, may preserve community ties that do not appear in standard records.

DNA evidence remains relevant here. Ongoing review of DNA matches with public trees or shared documentation may help confirm sibling relationships among Catherine, John, and Edward Sullivan and may also identify additional Sullivan connections in both the U.S. and Ireland.

D. Children of John and Julia (Whelan) Sullivan:

John Thomas Sullivan was born in Spring townland, County Waterford, on January 21, 1842, and baptized in Dungarvan Parish two days later, on January 23. He emigrated with his family and later lived in Scioto County, Ohio, where he married Mary Ellen Young on October 11, 1867. After her death, he married Sarah Agnes (Sheehan) Dunn on January 17, 1901, also in Scioto County. He died in Buena Vista on April 16, 1922.

James Sullivan was born in Spring townland and baptized in Dungarvan Parish on June 27, 1847. He later settled in the United States, where he married Susan Griffith, likely in 1879. He died in the Bronx, New York City, on June 28, 1931.

William Sullivan was born in Virginia around 1851, indicating that he was born after the family had emigrated from Ireland. He married Jennie Simmons Griffith on February 3, 1875, in Scioto County, Ohio. He later lived in New York, where he died on September 23, 1925.

Edward M. Sullivan was born in March 1852 in Colchester, Chittenden County, Vermont. He married Mary O'Bryan on July 10, 1876, and later lived in Kentucky, where he died in Dayton, Campbell County, on December 13, 1917.

Mary Sullivan was born in Virginia on February 4, 1854. She married Richard Adams and later lived in Pittsburgh, where she died on January 8, 1929.